Reading the Readers: Ethical and Methodological Issues for Researching Readers and Reading in the Digital Age

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The digital revolution has brought new opportunities but also dilemmas for researchers, particularly those attempting to engage with online users and communities. With the emergence of new methodologies such as digital ethnography or 'netnography' (Kozinets 2010) and new fields such as internet studies and fan studies, ethical and methodological issues have become the subject of recurring and often highly contentious debate. For example, a recent Special Issue of *Applied Linguistics Review* (2017) responded to key issues arising specifically from research on the language of online interactions, and concluded by highlighting the importance of transparency and self-reflexivity for researchers (Page 2017). The guidelines for conducting online research emerging as a result of these discussions are invaluable for individual researchers and for ethics committees, but as Page (2017) concedes, no one single policy or procedure can cover all eventualities, especially in such a constantly shifting media landscape. Another factor is that any advice or guidelines can quickly become outdated, for example with advances in internet search engines, and with constantly changing terms and conditions and affordances for social media platforms.

In this chapter, my aim is to focus specifically on the adjustments that researchers primarily concerned with the language used by readers in discussing their reading online may need to make in terms of responding to new methods and ethical practices. In particular, I will consider how we deal with written data about reading found online as 'text' and how we negotiate the freedom to be critical of others' opinions, interpretations and creative efforts, with the need to be ethically observant and to build relationships with research participants. I

also argue that methods based on anonymising and identifying broader patterns or trends in online 'data' may not do justice to the ways in which readers are often invested in defending what may be marginalised positions, or giving creative expression to complex and contradictory responses. My approach in this chapter follows the practice of other researchers confronting the challenges of working across on and offline environments (e.g Page 2017; Fuller and Rehberg Sedo forthcoming), providing 'researcher vignettes' (Tagg et al 2017) based on our own experiences so as to tease out the complex issues and compromises that experimenting with different methodologies and ethical practices so often exposes. The chapter will begin with brief overviews of key approaches to readers and audiences from multiple disciplines that have influenced my research, before discussing some of the specific ethical and methodological issues I have encountered and the ways in which I have attempted to resolve them.

1. Background to the Study of Readers and Audiences

When I studied language and literature at a redbrick university in the 1980s readers were always abstract, generic and masculine, and even where this might have been briefly contested, for instance in discussing feminist approaches to literature, or reader response criticism, this generally meant replacing one abstraction with another ("s/he'; 'the implied reader'). Nevertheless, constructing an argument based on an interpretation of a literary work consisted primarily of critically evaluating readings produced by other scholars. Linguistic and stylistic studies from this period also tended to focus primarily on evaluating literary texts and their interpretation with reference to textual evidence, and although empirical approaches based on studying actual readers actually reading became firmly established with the setting up of the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature in 1987, their

methods tended to focus on data gained from reading tasks conducted under laboratory-like conditions.

Meanwhile, since the 1980s, media and cultural studies scholars have been exploring ways of engaging with 'active' audiences (Fiske 1987), seeking to understand the relationship between ideology and reading (Hall's 'preferred reading' theory [1980]) and conducting ethnographic research of audiences at home or in the workplace (Morley 1986; Hobson 1991). While some (e.g. Hartley 1987) have questioned the extent to which such approaches can ever go beyond treating audiences as 'invisible fictions' or discursive constructions reflecting the ideologies and assumptions of researchers, the intent to engage with 'real' audience members and the specific social and political conditions in which they are situated clearly goes beyond most approaches to the study of literary readers and reading at the time. The disciplinary divide between media and literary studies in part reflects a seemingly clear distinction between a focus on mass practices and nuanced interpretations of specific aspects or themes of a specific work. These differences also of course in turn reflect assumptions about the nature of engaging in cultural activities experienced and shared with others (e.g. watching television or going to the cinema), versus the act of reading, conceived largely as a private, immersive experience enjoyed by the lone reader.

2. The Impact of the Digital

The 'digital revolution' has fundamentally unsettled some of these disciplinary divides, with the multiple modalities of 'born digital' (Bell et al 2010) literary texts requiring new approaches for their study, and terms such as the 'wreader' (Landow 1997: 17) suggesting fundamental shifts in how we understand the power relations between writers and readers. Projects based on cognitive and empirical approaches (e.g. E-Read 2016, Reading Digital

Fiction 2014-17) have provided important insights into the impact of the digital in terms of reading comprehension, the ergonomics of reading on digital devices, and how readers process particular linguistic and multimodal features within digital texts. Digitisation has also led to the emergence of a whole new field for the study of the 'digital humanities', facilitating large scale empirical studies based on mining data from both print and online sources. It has also given renewed impetus to approaches and methods from book history which has a long tradition of gathering empirical data about the 'reading experience' from a wide range of sources, including letters, journals and wills, often in ways which debunk received wisdom. For example, the recent discovery of papers relating to the publication of *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall has provided insights into how contemporary readers responded to the censoring of the novel, challenging the idea that the work was obscene and thanking the author for her 'honest and sensitive' approach to difficult subjects (Flood, 2019). The digitisation of these papers will in turn allow increased access to the materials for critics of the period, and also ensure that the materials will be stored and preserved for future generations. Meanwhile, the Reading Experience Database (2006-) has relied on a team of volunteers to digitise content relating to reading from 1495-1945, with a second phase of the project to set up REDs in Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, and New Zealand.

3. Web 2.0 and Online Participatory Cultures

As well as appearing to provide the legitimacy and validation associated with quantification and replicability, the digital revolution post Web 2.0 has also been hailed as fundamentally democratising access to and participation in the literary (Page and Thomas 2011). This opening up of the literary field includes increased opportunities for would be writers to publish their work online and gain immediate access to potentially vast audiences. It also includes the emergence of more and more forums for readers to come together to discuss

their reading and to produce their own creative responses to those texts (for example in the form of fanfiction), as well as unprecedented access to authors via their websites or social media accounts. The question of whether individuals in these contexts identify as fans or readers can itself be problematic (Thomas 2011b), but the fact that online spaces provide a means for readers to come together and establish a strong collective presence certainly facilitates a sense of community and collective power. In some instances, for example The Harry Potter Alliance, this can even result in readers becoming social activists using the 'power of story' to influence opinion on equality and human rights issues, for example campaigning under the guise of Dumbledore's Army to fight bigotry or using the 'spirit of Neville Longbottom' to fight back against various forms of bullying.

It was through my studies of fanfiction that I was first introduced to both the exciting possibilities and complex challenges of attempting to convey and represent the activities of fans as observed on various forums and fan communities. I was exhilarated by the tantalising prospect of being able to observe reading cultures 'in the wild' (Nakamura 2013: 241) and fascinated by the fact that all this activity was taking place in the context of heated debates about the extent to which the emergence of digital cultures could be blamed for an apparent decline in reading. In addition, the kinds of readings of popular and canonical texts and authors provided in these spaces were often highly subversive, challenging critical consensus and providing insights from individuals whose ethnicity, age, or sexuality gave them distinctive perspectives on, and investment in, the fictional worlds under consideration (Thomas 2011a; 2014).

4. Going Beyond Text

My training as a researcher versed in close textual analysis led me to focus on specific case studies and relatively stable, defined communities, rather than on attempting to identify larger patterns or typologies of fan practices. My main interest remained learning what the fans were doing with the source material of the literary fictions, mainly in the form of writing about them (Thomas 2007; 2011a). However, from this initial interest in fanfiction based on the creative interpretations of existing literary texts, I found it increasingly necessary to move beyond the fanfiction works themselves to explore the interactions between fans taking place via comments or activities such as beta reading, and to examine the infrastructures of the sites where these activities took place. In many ways this reflected once again my training as a researcher of literary language, concerned to identify and unpack the discourse type and specific features and affordances of the contexts for interaction and discussion that I was dealing with. Moreover, the architecture and design of these forums seemed to invite just this kind of free ranging exploration, and the opportunity to see texts emerge from works in progress with access to the input of both author and reader. To some extent, my practice followed that later discussed by Giaxoglou (2017), as my stance towards my research subjects took into account not only the terms and conditions and policies of the sites they were engaging with, but also the ways in which their language situated them in relation to a possible audience or wider public for their contributions. In addition, by focussing on the semiotics of aspects of the sites' design, or the affordances of different platforms, I was also engaging in the kind of modular approach to online research advocated by Spilioti (2017). But in so doing these explorations clearly took me beyond the comfort zone of dealing with readers as 'invisible fictions' towards something much closer to ethnography and immersion in the lived experience of real readers' engagement with literary texts and authors.

Of course, the seemingly unfettered access to readers 'in the wild' was in reality restricted to their written reports and reflections on reading, though in some instances reading activities were coordinated via the forums (e.g. the Group Reads of Jane Austen novels discussed by Thomas and Round 2016). In addition, most of the material that could be gleaned from these sites was textual, based on the written contributions and responses of community members, or the published terms and conditions of a particular forum. Apart from profile images or the occasional link to images or video content, most posts were text based. So my responses to the users I was observing was based largely on my observations of them as 'paper beings' (Barthes 1977:111), and however much information they might disclose about themselves, I now realise that my relationship with them as research subjects was very different to that I might have working alongside participants in a workshop situation, or interacting via telephone or video messaging. I now know that I am not alone in coming to this kind of recognition late. Spilioti (2017:13) warns of the dangers for language researchers of the 'deceit' that because writing is available for scrutiny and appears relatively stable and fixed even in an online context, this may lead to an objectification of research subjects and a neglect of the multimodal aspects of these spaces. Likewise, Georgakopolou (2017) writes about clashes in her own research between approaching research data as text versus acknowledging them as 'people' and between adopting the position of a reader-analyst versus that of an interlocutor-analyst. Certainly, in the context of researching online communities, the question of how exactly we distinguish between ethnographic methods such as participant observation and the kind of close reading practised in the humanities becomes difficult when the object of study is solely the textual traces users leave behind.

5. Access and Anonymity: Negotiating the Public versus the Private

Another potential ‘deceit’ in this context is where the sheer amount of activity taking place helps creates the impression of almost minute by minute access to reader responses. Following ongoing discussions, and becoming more and more familiar with the participants who cultivated colourful pseudonyms or avatars, it could often be hard to draw absolute lines between on- and offline selves, or between discussion of the fanfiction or source ‘texts’ and discussion of other topics of interest including real world events. The fact that the vast majority of the sites I looked at allowed unrestricted access to content and the apparent anonymity afforded to participants by their use of avatars were sufficient to ensure that my analysis at that time raised no particular ethical concerns. My initial approach was therefore to engage in the same kind of close textual analysis of content for user comments and interactions as I would for the fanfiction.

However, once I started to engage more with controversial content involving ‘real people’ (Thomas 2014) and to want to dig deeper into who the fans were and why they kept coming back to these sites, I began to question whether in certain cases what I was writing might potentially impact negatively on people who had never volunteered or agreed to be part of my studies. In this respect, like many other researchers of online communities, I was slow to recognise that, as Giaxoglou (2017) puts it, ease of access does not mean ethical access. An ethical grey area opens up when it comes to the liminal space where discussion about an author or a book becomes a discussion about some aspect of the reader’s personal life, though this can be especially difficult to define where the reader’s interpretation of or investment in a fictional world is so intimately tied up with their sense of their own identity. Likewise, someone who participates in a forum as a reader may also self-present elsewhere on the same site as a writer, raising an important question to do with how we give credit to creative producers but also those who contribute so much to discussions and critical understandings

whether or not they themselves publish creative content. Another complicating factor in this context is the degree to which content is co-created, and the extent to which users may consider themselves to have the kinds of rights but also responsibilities associated with professional authors or producers. Certainly, in my early studies of fanfiction I assumed that authors of the published works would expect to be credited, and it seemed logical to extend this to the surrounding discussion. As Kennedy (2006) has demonstrated, the question of anonymity for participants in online spaces can be complex, particularly those for whom identity is something that is fiercely contested, so at the very least researchers should be aware of and sensitive to the particular ways in which anonymity may be conceived and understood within a specific community.

Nevertheless, reflecting back on some of these studies, I now realise that my use of personal details gleaned from the sites about some of the users I discussed could potentially be seen as revealing or intrusive, particularly where users might be unaware of how information about them may be used months or years later. These early studies also risked unwittingly 'othering' my research subjects and erecting a divide between them as the subjects of the research, and me as the researcher, bringing my knowledge and intuition to bear on their contributions.

Debates about how we differentiate between the public and the private in online spaces continue and are complicated by the culture of sharing and the idea of the relational rather than the individual self that are so intrinsic to the contemporary version of the social network (Giaxoglou, 2017). Another complicating factor, especially for those committed to always consider language in context, is the phenomenon of 'context collapse' (as coined by Marwick and boyd 2011 and discussed in relation to linguistic approaches by Georgakopolou 2017),

which occurs, for instance, where a user posts something intended for an intimate audience but which goes 'viral' and is accessed and shared by millions. Anonymising content, for example by assigning a number or code to participants, risks stripping it of the kind of detail that can often be necessary for eliciting understanding or empathy, and for understanding context. In the case of online users who often expend quite a bit of creative energy constructing their profiles, it can also be said to detract from their attempts to imaginatively express their identity. Again, my training led me to always try to provide as much context as possible for understanding individual contributions or the interactions between users. Direct quotation provides the basis for my analysis and interpretation, and it seemed obvious to me that I should do all I could to enable my readers to be able to search for my sources and examine the 'evidence' for themselves. In the case of the communities I studied, while participants did disclose and discuss personal matters, their main reason for participating was to share their interpretations and opinions of specific texts or authors, and while overt criticism of others' views may have been dispreferred, some of the communities I looked at (particularly in Thomas 2011b) were much more demanding in terms of the level of knowledge required to participate, and much more combative and adversarial in their interactions. So to some extent it could be argued that by participating in these kinds of discussion, community members could expect to have their views tested and challenged by others, as they themselves put forward theories and interpretations which might be provocative or controversial. Conversations between these 'citizen critics' (Eberly 2000) could thus be argued to be 'public acts of interpretation' (2) taking place in the public sphere.

However, when I was asked to contribute a humanities perspective to a study of the ethical implications of researching online health discussion boards (Bond et al. 2013), the need to protect participants and report responsibly on their activity seemed much clearer. This

extended not just to anonymising sources but to exploring how the actual words of participants could (if at all) be used responsibly. Given the sensitivity of the topics under discussion we considered whether paraphrasing was preferable to direct quotation, and even explored whether changing verbatim quotations could work in order to preserve anonymity while capturing something of the tone of the contribution. While I could understand the argument that this might be necessary to avoid individuals being identifiable, I really struggled with the idea of interfering with the language of contributions in any way because of the possibility of misrepresenting the discussions and denuding them of their distinctive stylistic features. However, when I later came to write an article about the stories told by people living with dementia on social media (Thomas 2017), I reluctantly used this strategy as a compromise between my desire to protect the anonymity of participants for whom consent would be highly problematic, with the pressure from the journal editors to provide some concrete examples of the kinds of discourse I was purporting to discuss. Anonymity is also crucial for a research student of mine studying controversial content in online Chinese fan forums, where both her participants and the researcher herself could be at risk from the authorities if identified. Nevertheless, as Spilioti (2017) demonstrates, the question of exactly what information may be compromising remains problematic, especially when we come to consider metadata which is automatically disclosed.

6. Reflexivity and the Responsibilities of Researchers

In the field of fan studies, an important consideration is the extent to which the researcher identifies as a 'fan' and can be recognised as a full participant in a community with all the sense of responsibility and loyalty that may entail. The term 'aca fan' has been coined by leading fan scholar Henry Jenkins to convey the idea of a hybrid identity for fan researchers, and prompted debate about the compromises this stance may entail in practice (Evans and

Stasi, 2014). In her doctoral thesis on the ethics of internet research in relation to fan sites, Whiteman (2007) reflects on her own experiences of negotiating with the subjects of her research, providing them with some sense of a right to reply and of her ongoing commitment to their communities. More recently, Page (2017) has written of the consequences for researchers of the increased discoverability digitisation brings both in terms of their published work but also for them as individuals easily contactable via email or social media.

The question of my own presence and visibility with regards to the communities I was studying only really became an issue for me when I moved from basing my research purely on material I found by 'lurking' on various sites, to attempting to engage with participants through online interaction and interviews. Of course, this presents its own ethical and methodological issues, particularly with regards to the impact that my presence as a researcher might have on the interactions and behaviours of those I was observing. Nevertheless, it also opens up the possibility of a productive 'dialogic approach' (Page et al 2014) involving negotiation with smaller sets of participants and continual reflection and reassessment. In the first instance, therefore, my strategy was to contact a limited number of users whose fictions or posts had attracted my attention via the forums or direct messaging/email in order to try to get some sense of an insider view of the communities and also to learn more about the users than could be gleaned from their online profiles. Everyone I contacted seemed happy to answer my questions and to provide permission for me to quote from their responses, which I duly credited in the published pieces. In the case of one of these studies (Thomas 2011b), immediately post publication my chapter and the volume in which it was published themselves became a topic of conversation on the online forum for a short period of time, and some of the participants I had interviewed commented on their experiences and involvement. This experience, which coincided with more stringent

oversight of the ethics of online research both within my own institution and in the academic fields with which I was primarily engaging, led me to reflect further on my own ethical and methodological practices and the extent to which these needed to be formalised and rationalised much more rigorously.

7. Mixed Methods Approaches

In my more recent work on digital reading, a key influence has been the practices of scholars primarily associated with the fields of book history and literary sociology. With digital tools offering new kinds of access to readers, mixed methods approaches (Fuller and Rehberg Sedo 2012) involving interviews, focus groups and so on, make it possible to combine analysis of what readers *do* with insights into their motivations and reflections on their reading and the reading related activities they participate in. It also provides the opportunity to combine on and offline research, mitigating the danger of 'digital dualism' whereby the on and offline worlds are treated as though separated by an impermeable barrier. Moreover, a mixed methods approach is especially suited to understanding reading as something which takes place within an 'interpretive community' (Fish 1980) where the power relations and social interactions between participants may be crucial in understanding the kinds of interpretations they form and share with one another, and also for understanding how those interpretations may be valued and taken up by others.

Researching Readers Online (2012) and the Digital Reading Network (2013-15) were projects funded by the AHRC that I led in collaboration with my colleague Julia Round to explicitly engage with emerging approaches and methods for the study of digital reading, and encompassing reading practices across a wide range of digital platforms and devices. For Researching Readers Online we adopted a mixed methods approach, with an online survey of

readers from online book clubs and discussions forums and focus groups with students, librarians, writers and teachers from the locality. Both the survey and the focus groups challenged our assumptions about 'digital natives' and the extent to which they were engaging with digital reading practices, and both also produced some rich qualitative data in terms of the emotions and passions aroused when our questions touched on some of the changes brought about by digitisation and how these might affect readers and reading. The Digital Reading Network brought together researchers of readers and audiences from multiple disciplines, and set out to explore emerging techniques for capturing 'big data' alongside public engagement activities and discussions with teachers of literature. For all of the research that involved dealing with members of the public or non-academic stakeholders we used participant information sheets and release forms, and always advised participants that they could withdraw from the project at any stage.

8. Moving from Subjects to Participants

Increased sensitivities about our online data in the aftermath of the Snowden and Cambridge Analytica controversies, and increasing concerns about the toxicity of so much of the discourse on social media platforms, have meant that many users are guarded and even suspicious about signing up to take part in research studies, thus making questions of consent and recruitment increasingly problematic. This clearly impacted on our online research activities as many of those we contacted directly queried the purpose and remit of the project. In addition, when we sought permission to post our survey on various forums we often encountered hostility from site administrators and forum moderators. Another issue affecting the recruitment of participants online is the ephemeral nature of many people's involvement with online communities, which was another reason why we chose to focus on well-established and clearly defined groups and on users who featured prominently in discussions.

In a recent post on social media, a ‘subject’ who has participated in a number of online mental health research projects publicly announced that she would no longer be offering her services, taking issue with the ways in which her data had been collected and (mis)interpreted and the idea that ‘giving voice’ to people such as her in fact did the complete opposite. The anger expressed by this subject at her sense of broken trust was very powerfully expressed, but it also posed the question of how this could be avoided, given that some degree of interpretation of the data was inevitable, and that the need for some quantification and verification of findings might necessarily drown out the nuances of how specific experiences are shared and reported.

For our article on the roles of moderators in online reading groups and discussions forums (Thomas and Round 2016), based on the research from our first two projects, we analysed two specific communities, and conducted interviews with the moderators responsible for managing their various activities. We had been observing the activities of both groups online over a period of some years. In the case of one group we had met the moderator ‘in real life’ after contacting him over a period of time via email, while our relationship with the other moderator was based solely on email and direct messaging. Both interviews were conducted using Skype, combining the ease of access of the digital with the intimacy of an interpersonal interaction where we could see each other. This seemed suited to a study which sought to engage with the moderators and hear their experiences, setting this against our observations and analysis of the discussions taking place on the sites. As with Researching Readers Online, the interviews with the moderators in many ways fundamentally challenged our ‘readings’ of the conduct of the two communities and the roles of the moderators. However, another consequence of combining analysis and interviews in this way was that the

relationships that we had established with the moderators and our gratitude for their participation resulted in our feeling a sense of responsibility to not only ensuring that their work was fairly represented, but also to avoid anything that can could be seen as criticising them or the communities they worked so hard to sustain. Lambrou (2014) has written about how the relationship between an ethnographer and her subjects can raise difficult ethical and methodological issues, particularly with regards to the researcher's empathy for and responsibility towards participants. In the case of our study, the ethical and methodological issues we faced involved balancing the expectation that research should be objective with our growing sense of affinity with the moderators. This conflict did not extend in the same way to the participants in the online discussion groups who we had not met or interacted with directly.

9. Creative Participatory Methods

Coming from a discipline (literary criticism) that has traditionally never particularly worried about the impact that our readings might have on others (e.g. the authors or real life subjects of a particular work) being faced with these stark ethical and methodological dilemmas can be profoundly unsettling. The very emergence of the field of the digital humanities perhaps speaks to the need for scholars to adapt and critically reflect on both the strengths and weaknesses of new and existing methods but also their impact and consequences and to reappraise how we approach the 'human' as the subject of research in the age of the digital and the virtual. One response has been to seek out creative methods which may entail an element of risk but which reposition and realign the roles of researchers and subjects and which allow space for serendipitous and complex or contradictory findings. In the field of media studies, David Gauntlett (2011) has been a key figure in developing creative research methods based on engaging participants as makers rather than consumers of media content.

Such methods and approaches may be especially appropriate for the study of reading to counter the current focus on empirical studies of reading as comprehension or cognitive processing of information, but also to provide some evidence and insights into a whole range of readerly activities and practices that may be blindsided by abstract theoretical accounts. For example, a recent study by Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (forthcoming) uses the Story Circle method to try to capture negative experiences of reading that they argue tend to be marginalised or overlooked in part at least because researchers of reading are themselves so heavily invested in the idea of reading as beneficial and transformative.

A creative and participatory approach to capturing the diverse experiences of contemporary readers underpins Reading on Screen (2017-18), the most recent project on digital reading funded by the AHRC which I led. For this project the research team worked intensively with small groups of participants over a three-day period to co-create digital stories reflecting on their reading lives and their responses to the changes affecting their reading preferences and practices in the context of digitisation. We relied on digital tools to recruit participants, to maintain group contact and communication (a Facebook group) and to share the stories produced by our participants with wider audiences (through the project website and YouTube). However, it was the facilitated workshops based on the digital storytelling methodology that primarily contributed to fostering a strong sense of a group dynamic and bond between participants, and between the participants, the facilitators and the researchers.

As with Fuller and Rehberg Sedo's study, Reading on Screen's focus on storytelling produced rich data in the sense of powerfully communicating the lived, personal experiences of our participants. Yes, there were stories which recounted the benefits and transformative potential reading offered participants who were dealing with mental health issues, but other

stories also offered insights into the experiences of reluctant readers and reflected on the feelings of exclusion and social stigma haunting those who had never learned to read at all. In this sense the project also contributed to taking research on reading into new territory in terms of engaging with diverse readers beyond the usual pool of students, book club members or self-identifying 'avid' readers. The digital stories allowed participants to express their diverse experiences of reading through images, music and animation as well as through their scripts and oral narration. The interaction between participants of different ages, social class and ethnic backgrounds produced some lively discussions but also unexpected creative collaborations, and the conversations around reading blended with personal memories, social histories of family and community, and contemporary politics.

The project was designed to ensure that participants' involvement would extend beyond producing the stories, and many of the participants have taken part in exhibitions and screenings as well as other follow up events. Much of the project design and delivery was influenced and shaped by the ethos and methodology of the digital storytelling movement as developed by arts practitioners and educators in the United States under the auspices of Story Center. Arguably, this methodology could not be put into practice without the digital, both in the sense of the tools needed to produce the films, but also in terms of the focus on user involvement and participation that is at its heart. Also at the heart of the digital storytelling ethos is the idea that participants have full creative control and ownership of the stories they produce, so there was no question of anonymising the process and in fact we included short biographies to provide context for the stories and for the individuals' reading lives as part of our website design.

The digital stories produced are multimodal and importantly feature the voices of participants as narrators. All materials and media used in the stories come from the participants themselves, are generated in the workshops, or are taken from open access online resources. The participants edit the stories with support from the technical facilitators and so as well as providing them with the opportunity to create their own short film, the workshops also introduce them to new digital skills. Many of our participants have continued experimenting with digital stories after the workshops, reflecting the central role of reading in their lives. As part of the design for this project, we also created short films based on audio and video footage captured during the workshops to reflect on the process and to offer insights into some of the discussions that took place around the activities focused on producing the stories. This has provided another rich resource as these discussions often explicitly addressed issues around the impact of the digital in a way that many of the stories did not. To date, the project has yet to fully utilise this material. One option would be transcribe and code the contributions, but the danger here would be that the energy and animation of some of these impromptu stories and reminiscences would be lost.

As Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (forthcoming) acknowledge, these kind of methods are very resource intensive, and require a fine balance between facilitation and direction when it comes to trying to meet project aims and objectives. Recruitment of participants was also challenging, mainly because of the requirement to commit to attending over three days. Although the digital storytelling method remains largely unchanged since the 1990s, practitioners continue to debate some of the ethical and methodological issues raised, particularly with regards to the notion of 'giving voice' to marginalised groups which has recently been problematised and interrogated across a wide range of disciplines. In our project, we discussed the risks attaching to making the films publicly available and open to

comment, opting to manage comments so as to filter out any abusive content (I am pleased to say we haven't had any as yet!). Another ongoing issue is that despite our best intentions we have lost contact with some of our participants, and our ability to provide ongoing support is in reality quite limited. So while this phase of my research was by far the most closely scrutinised in terms of ethics and methods, and the most rewarding in terms of the outcomes, I continue to reflect on the lessons learned and compromises chosen.

10. Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, research on reading in digital contexts poses numerous questions about how we define the object of study but also about how we approach the specific affordances and challenges of online spaces and negotiate the ways in which the on and offline worlds collide. While there are traditions and histories that we can fruitfully draw on from multiple disciplines, my concern is that we should not necessarily abandon or reject some of the ideas and approaches to reading that underpin our practices as researchers of literature. In particular, these involve our skills as professional or specialised readers in sifting through and making selections of illustrative examples and providing close analysis of language and form, while also recognising that those selections and interpretations are also subject to constant revision and challenge. However, this has to be tempered with respect and sensitivity to research subjects and participants who agree to work with us who may not be familiar with the rough and tumble of academic debate and the ways in which their words and contributions may be taken up and interpreted by others. It can be tempting to hide behind institutional ethical approval rather than acknowledge the need for ethics to be constantly reviewed and embedded in practice. Where research projects are set up to work *with* participants and to allow them to express themselves creatively, this can be potentially beneficial in terms of both opening up lines of dialogue and ensuring that participants feel a

sense of investment and even ownership of the project. Moreover, where the outputs emerging from a study are presented as a series of stories, it offers the possibility to engage with and revisit them more as part of an open-ended collaborative process rather than as data to be analysed and coded.

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